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## WORKMANSHIP

BY KENYON COX<sup>1</sup>

AMONG the qualities of fine painting there is none more neglected today, as there is none that was more insisted on in the past, than workmanship—what might be properly called technique were it not that we have forgotten what the word technique really means. Instead of its signifying to us, as it should, the beautiful and skilful use of our material to bring out its highest qualities, it has come to mean only the display of a certain dexterity in the handling of a big brush—an ostentatious and rather brutal cleverness forced upon us by the necessity of out-shouting others in our modern exhibitions. We think of a Sorolla as a technician, while a master of delicate workmanship, like Maxfield Parrish, can say of himself that he “has no technique, only a kind of coach painter’s finish.”

Well, we artists might learn something from the coach painters, for they can do what most of us cannot; they can produce a beautiful and even surface, they can draw a line with perfect precision, they can make a piece of work that will last. They know their trade, which most of us do not—they are good workmen and can bring out the beauty of their material.

Let me quote to you a few of the sayings of one of the best painters of the nineteenth century—a man who had more of the qualities of the old Dutch and Flemish masters than any other modern—Alfred Stevens.

“Painting is not done for exhibitions—Refined work is smothered and ‘shouters’ come off better. . . . One is only a great painter on condition of being a master workman. . . . A fine picture, of which one admires the effect at a distance, ought equally to bear analysis when one looks at it near to. . . . The execution of a fine painting is agreeable to the touch.”

Now I cannot tell you how to produce fine workmanship—if I could I should feel much more comfortable about my own

work. All I can do is to call your attention to the beauty of workmanship of some of the pictures here in the Museum; to try to make you see how important this technical beauty—this mastery of material—is; and to hope I may set you to trying for something of this quality in your own work.

This quality of beautiful workmanship is to be found in many schools and is produced in many ways, but it is nowhere more notable than in the early Flemish painting of the school of the Van Eycks, the reputed inventors of oil painting. This early Flemish work is remarkable for three things: for a smooth beauty of surface like that of lacquer or enamel; for minuteness and precision of finish combined with breadth of effect and beauty of color; and for such soundness and permanence that it is fresher and better preserved today than almost any of the work of the last century.

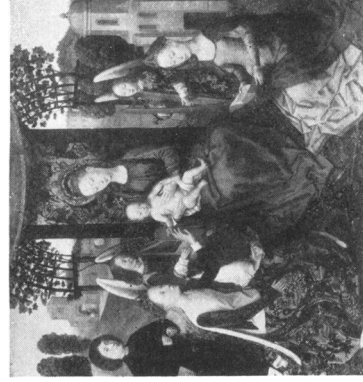
We have no representative work of the Van Eycks in the Museum but we have the next best thing in the Memlings of the Altman Collection. Look first at the portraits of Thomas and Marie Portinari. Note their clean drawing and beautiful modeling and see how it is done with a smoothness as of ivory, without any visible brush marks, the paint itself made as lovely as the finest porcelain. Then look at the exquisite precision in the painting of the gold and black brocade in the Betrothal of Saint Catherine and see how delightful mere perfection of workmanship can be.

This beautiful and delicate workmanship is common to the whole school and you may see a fine instance of it in the work of a much later and smaller man, Gerard David. In his Crucifixion there is a kneeling figure, praying at the foot of the cross. I imagine that this figure is a portrait, and that it is perhaps largely because it is a portrait that it is more beautifully painted than the other figures in the picture, which are made out of the artist’s head—are more abstract and idealized in their way, although not in the Italian way. This portrait figure, in the perfect painting of the head and hands, and of the sleeves, is one of the finest examples you could see of the beauty of the close, smooth Flemish workmanship.

<sup>1</sup>An informal talk to students of drawing and painting delivered at the Museum on Feb. 3, 1917.



THOMAS PORTINARI  
BY HANS MEMLING



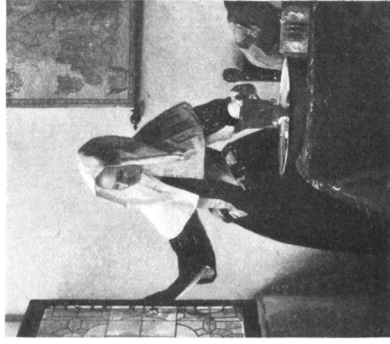
BETROTHAL OF ST. CATHERINE  
BY HANS MEMLING



MARIE PORTINARI  
BY HANS MEMLING



THE CRUCIFIXION  
BY GERARD DAVID



YOUNG WOMAN WITH A WATER JUG  
BY JOHANNES VERMEER



OLD WOMAN IN AN ARM-CHAIR  
BY REMBRANDT

Upon this Flemish manner is founded that of Holbein, and two out of the three Holbeins in the Museum are worthy of careful study for their workmanship. The *Portrait of a Young Man* belongs, I imagine, to his early days in Basle and is less solid in its texture than his later work and is certainly less perfectly drawn. Look at it closely and you will see that the painting of the head is almost translucent, it is so delicate, a semi-opaque flesh-tone, very evenly laid, the whole thing modeled with nothing. But the later one, the portrait of Margaret Wyatt, is still finer. It is redder in tone than is common with Holbein, and is not of his very finest work, but it is very good. Here the flesh is less translucent, the enamel is firmer and more opaque, but it is as smooth and even as in the Memlings—Holbein has made but the slightest modification of the old Flemish technique.

Long after this smooth manner of painting had been abandoned in Flanders, it was carried on in Holland, and you will find the same technical perfection combined with greater truth in the rendering of light in the painting of the Dutch School down to the end of the seventeenth century—in the work of Terborch and Metsu and Vermeer. You have always the exquisite surface, the perfect precision, the beauty of finish.

Of course, mere detail, the mere carrying of the work to the point of high finish, does not necessarily mean the presence of fine quality. Nobody ever finished more than Gerard Dou did, unless it were Meissonier, but neither of them gives us the sense of perfect quality and surface. But if you will look at the Metsu, belonging to Mr. Morgan, here in the Museum, the *Visit to the Nursery*, you will see a fine example of what Stevens speaks of—a picture which has a fine effect from a distance, but which also bears the closest inspection. That picture in its general tone, its general effect of a grave and quiet interior, its black and white marble pavement, and the spaces of dark and light all through it, is extremely beautiful. Seen from across the gallery as a decorative whole, its general effect is perfect at that distance. Go

up closer and you will find not only that it nowhere loses anything by approaching, but as you approach it closer and closer more and more charming things reveal themselves. The detail and the finish are wonderful but the most wonderful thing is that each added detail is a new beauty, that all of these details are in themselves charming things, and give you a new pleasure as you approach the picture, added to all the pleasure that the picture gave you from a distance. The Dutch, fortunately, painted their pictures for their houses, not for exhibitions, and as a picture was to hang on a wall, usually in a small room, they had the feeling that it must be beautiful when seen close at hand.

You may pass from that picture to the Vermeer, *A Young Woman with a Water Jug*. It is lighter, grayer than the other, less microscopically finished perhaps, equally perfect in surface. It has a great deal more than mere beautiful surface and beautiful workmanship. It has an extraordinary perfection in the notation of light, so that nobody has ever painted an interior light with its delicate gradations as truthfully as Vermeer painted it. But all its great qualities of drawing and of truth of light might conceivably be present and yet the picture might not charm us as it does if it had not its impeccable workmanship. For good workmanship is always agreeable and respectable in anything. A good piece of cabinet work, a good piece of carpentry, anything that is perfectly done in its own way, is admirable and has in itself something of art, and if one can learn to feel this quality and to see how much it adds to the enjoyment afforded us by any picture, one will have made a great step towards understanding what painting is.

Now, quitting this smooth technique, let us take up a later manner of painting which is what you might call granular, in which a certain roughness of surface was intentionally made in the under-painting in order to catch the glazes which were put on afterwards. If you look at good work of this type, you will find that the ridges of the paint, the tops of this granular surface, are nearly always lighter than the hollows,

the glazing colors catching in those hollows, and this breaking of the color gives it a certain vivacity combined with purity and richness which can hardly be secured in any other way.

This method of painting began, so far as I know, with the Venetians. The Catena Portrait of a Procurator is the work of an artist who, while he was a contemporary of Giorgione, belonged rather to the elder school and never wholly followed the revolution which Venetian painting was making in his day. His technique is rather like that smooth technique which we have been speaking of, except that it is more solid, there is a little more body and thickness to his paint, and his work is a little more richly colored than that of the Dutchmen and Flemings. But in the Giorgione Portrait of a Man in the Altman Collection you may clearly see the beginning of that later Venetian technique which reached its highest point in the finest works of Titian.

There is nothing in the Museum that gives a good idea of the work of Titian or of that of any of the later Venetian painters, except Veronese (whose workmanship is hardly Venetian) and for an example of the true Venetian method I must refer you to the little picture of St. Martha Interceding for the Cessation of the Plague, attributed to the School of Van Dyck. Van Dyck, of course, was a Fleming but he spent a great many years in Italy and he had at one time a distinctly Italian style, and this little picture, whoever painted it, is a rather good example of that later Venetian technique, although the types of the figures and the arrangement of the composition are unmistakably late Flemish.

Now what I want you to notice about the painting of this picture is how extremely slight and restrained is the granulation of the surface; how very little the paint is loaded; with what delicate means it achieves that palpitating beauty of color. It is delicate, it is restrained, it is refined, and that is what all fine workmanship is. This is not a very great picture. It is the very able work of a man who had mastered his technique, and the amount of beauty that good workmanship can achieve

and the amount of pleasure it can give are all the better exemplified by it because it is not in other respects a work of any great importance.

Of all the painters among the old masters who employed this granular technique we are apt to think of Rembrandt as one of the most extreme, and there are pictures of his in which there is distinctly heavy loading. But one of the very best of Rembrandt's smaller canvases is the portrait of a man, sometimes known as the Man with a Black Hat, in the Marquand Collection here in the Museum. It was originally bought for Mr. Marquand by Mr. Weir, who thinks as highly of it as I do. Now look at that picture and though its roughened surface will strike you rather strongly at first, notice how little heavy loading there really is in it, how quiet and restrained its surface really is. Powerful as it is and strong as it is in light and shade, it is extremely delicate, reticent, restrained work, and that is the mark of fine workmanship in any manner. All exaggerated workmanship is poor workmanship. You may find certain excesses and exaggerations in Rembrandt's own work, but only in his poorer things. In no master that I know of will you find anything like the sticky, loaded, heavy masses of paint that we see every day. The great men do not paint in that way.

If there ever was one, Rubens is a robust genius. He has even been thought brutally vulgar in his robustness. Nobody, certainly, considers him as over-refined, yet Rubens's workmanship, Rubens's technique is in some ways one of the most delicate I know. His modification of the Venetian method depended largely on reducing the solid under-painting to little more than a transparent rubbing, and this rubbing makes up ninety-nine hundredths of the surface of his pictures. He loads nowhere except in the high lights, and how little he loads there may be rather surprising to you, when you once begin to study him. The next time you see his great hunting picture in the Museum look at the tail of the white horse and see how it is painted. You will find that it is done with one thin scrubbing of color, semi-opaque, semi-

transparent, but extremely tenuous. Into this are dragged a few lines of opaque color to give a little snap, a little accent, to the great mass of rubbings, and the thing is done. That is Rubens's method, and you can follow it all through the picture. Look at the fur of his foxes and wolves. It is extraordinarily rich, marvelously deep soft fur, but see how little paint he has used to express it. This great, robust, beefy giant of a Rubens works habitually and more and more as he grows older, more and more as he thoroughly masters his trade, with such infinitesimal rubbings, until some of his later pictures seem to be painted with a breath rather than with anything else; there is almost no material on the canvas.

Van Dyck's portrait of James Stuart, in the Marquand Room, is painted mainly on Rubens's system. It is less robust, less forceful than Rubens, more, very much more, refined in form and character, but we are now concerned with the restrained precision of its workmanship. Look, for instance, at the painting of the lace collar with every detail perfectly worked out so that you can enjoy the pattern of the lace as much as you could if the thing itself were before you, yet kept absolutely in its place. In the earlier primitive work the lace would have been there with all its detail, but it would not quite so surely have taken its place on the figure and in the air. In later work you would have had the appearance of the lace perhaps, you would not have had the lace itself with its pattern. In Van Dyck you have both, and the whole picture from top to bottom has the same quality. The face is beautifully modeled, the hair is delicious to look at, the blue ribbon, the star on the cloak, the little wrinkles in his silk stockings, are all, as mere handling of paint, as mere precise and beautiful workmanship, endlessly delightful. The magnificent character and drawing of the dog is less a question of mere workmanship, but look at the dog again and see the thin fluidity of painting, and note what a striking effect of solidity has been gained with very little in the way of material.

There is a replica of this picture now on view in New York. Go from the picture

here to the picture down on Fifth Avenue, compare the mere workmanship of the two, and I do not see how you can help arriving at the conclusion that this picture is Van Dyck's, the other only from Van Dyck's shop. The drawing, the composition, the color, all these might be Van Dyck's; the workmanship is not.

I remember a similar instance in the case of Holbein. I had known for a long time a Holbein portrait in the Louvre, the portrait of Robert Southwell, which always seemed to me a very good Holbein, until I came across the original in the Uffizi. In anything that would show in a photograph it would be impossible to tell one picture from the other. They are exactly similar in all the qualities that we ordinarily speak of in works of art, in the form, in the color, in the character and expression. But there is a vast difference in workmanship, and when you have once seen the wonderful beauty of the material and of the handiwork of Holbein in that picture in Florence, you know at once that the other may have come out of his studio, but it did not come from his hands.

But let us look at the craftsmanship of a rather romantic and eccentric painter whom it has become the fashion among extreme modernists to admire somewhat extravagantly—Goya. Here in the Museum is Goya's Don Sebastian Martinez, and knowing his reputation for extravagance it is surprising to see the quiet solidity, the evenness and smoothness of this painting. The head is soundly and quietly executed but the most remarkable thing in the picture is the painting of the steel-blue coat. It is a development of that system of transparent under-painting and opaque top painting that I spoke of as Rubens's invention. Go up close and look at that coat and you will find that over a warm ground it has been painted with almost infinitesimal draggings of fluid semi-opaque color, so thin as to be almost transparent. These little cool blue upper paintings are laid on with the utmost delicacy, and the whole coat is one shimmer of light.

Now, that means, in the first place, a great knowledge of the laws of color, but



PORTRAIT OF A MAN  
 BY HANS HOLBEIN



MARGARET WYATT, LADY LEE  
 BY HANS HOLBEIN



PORTRAIT OF A MAN  
 BY REMBRANDT



A VISIT TO THE NURSERY  
 BY GABRIEL METSU



JAMES STUART, DUKE OF LENNOX  
 BY VAN DYCK



WOLF AND FOX HUNT  
 BY RUBENS

it means also a great precision and beauty of technical handling, and even in Goya, with his tendency towards rather savage methods at times, there was that strange delicacy of workmanship to use when he wanted to use it.

I particularly regret the loss to the Museum of Hals's *Vrouw Bodolphe* because it is one of the best things I know by the painter from whom more than from any other our modern direct method of painting—our big-brush-handling style—is derived. The practitioners of what I can only call slap-dash seem to imagine that Hals is their justification. Now there are a few pictures by Hals that look as if he might have done them when he had stayed a little too long in the tavern where we know he spent a great part of his time. There are pictures of his that are reckless and loose, that are slap-dash, but at his best the wonder of Hals's painting is not its ease and directness but its precision. In a picture like the *Vrouw Bodolphe* there is no sense of the handling at all. What you see is the extraordinary brilliancy of rendering. It has a perfectly even body of paint, thicker than with the primitives but equally united from one end to the other. After you have noted that, consider the absolute precision of the drawing—for instance, the way in which each little quilling in the ruff is perfectly drawn in its perspective as the ruff turns, and the exquisite gradation of the light from the front to the back. This ruff in itself is a pure miracle of workmanship.

But because Hals occasionally, when he was in a hurry or half drunk, slapped in things with a startling freedom, people forget the sound thoroughness of his workmanship in such pictures as this, and think that they can paint as he did in his maturity and in his moments of recklessness without having first learned, as he did, to paint quietly and perfectly. It can't be done. You can forgive a great master occasionally for looseness and carelessness, but in the hands of anyone but a master, looseness is altogether too apt to become slackness.

I have picked out one or two later things for you to look at, not because they are

comparable with the works I have been speaking of, but because they show how much good workmanship does tell—how much even an approach to good workmanship tells—in pictures otherwise of no great importance. One of the things I have marked here, for instance, is Sir Thomas Lawrence's portrait of the Rev. William Pennicott. Now, most of Lawrence's work is clever, but superficial and rather meretricious. Once in a while he painted seriously, as well as he knew how, and this portrait is one of the things which show him at his best. Of course, a good part of the superiority of this picture is the superiority of serious drawing and character study. Lawrence could draw. He very often did not, but he differs in this respect from most of the other English painters, that he could draw when he chose. This head of Mr. Pennicott is quietly and well drawn, an interesting study in character, but its greatest superiority over Lawrence's other work is, I think, in its workmanship, which is not flippant and meretriciously clever, as it too often is with Lawrence, but is sober and very charming in certain ways. The head is painted with a certain solidity of *pâte*, as the French call it, of material, which is like the glaze of a fine piece of pottery, kept to an even richness of surface, and on that rich, even surface, a few little high lights are touched delicately and crisply but melting into the rest, giving it just that little snap which makes it beautiful to look at without any regard to what it represents.

Then there is the sketch of the *Three Graces* by Etty. It is little more than an under-painting and shows, I imagine, the way in which Etty began his pictures with the intention of glazing over them afterwards. Some parts of it are very unfinished. The draperies are only indicated in a very careless manner and the heads are not carried very far. There is almost no color and while the drawing is cleverish, it is not great. The one thing that makes it a lovely canvas, a canvas which any painter would like to have, is its workmanship. The thin, semi-transparent tones of the flesh with the little heavy dragging of





PORTRAIT OF A MAN  
 BY GIORGIONE



A VENETIAN PROCURATOR  
 BY VINCENZO CATENA



DON SEBASTIAN MARTINEZ  
 BY GOYA



REV. WILLIAM PENNICOTT  
 BY SIR THOMAS LAWRENCE



THE THREE GRACES  
 BY WILLIAM ETTY

the lights just in the right places, and the melting of the surface from these dragged lights into the general mass of flesh make it a delightful and charming thing. Etty paints well, just as a good carpenter or cabinet maker makes a beautiful joint or lays two pieces of wood evenly and cleanly together.

What I have been trying to impress upon you, then, is that there is such a thing in painting as workmanship, and that it is very important; that our modern big-brush painting rarely has any real technical charm, and that some of our modern painting which has not even flowing brush marks—which is painted with chunks of paint which look as if they had been scraped off a palette—not only is not charming, but is actively disagreeable. We have arrived at a kind of painting which forces you to get twenty feet away from the picture, not to enjoy it but to endure it. If you will study the pictures I have mentioned for the qualities I have called your attention to, I think you will go away understanding that painting is a handicraft and that Stevens was right when he said: "One is only a great painter on condition of being a master workman."

## A BLUE AND WHITE WEAVE FROM PERUGIA

ONE of the most interesting types of mediaeval loomwork is that of the blue and white Umbrian weaves from Perugia, a delightful example of which has recently been presented to the Museum by Mrs. Edward S. Harkness.

The frequent appearance of these weaves in the works of the Italian masters indicates that they were in general use in Italy in the fourteenth century, and continued in vogue until the sixteenth, when the industry seems to have been abandoned, or relegated to the cottage craft of the peasants, when weaving as a household art of the nobility was supplanted by needlework.

Many illustrations of the mediaeval loom are found in early woodcuts, but in Pin-turicchio's Return of Ulysses, we have per-

haps the most accurate representation that has been preserved to us, and in this work every detail of its mechanism may be studied—provided one is not distracted by the exquisite charm of Penelope as she sits at her loom by an open casement overlooking the sea, plying her shuttle with all the naïve grace of a finished coquette.

One of the earliest of these decorative weaves appears in Giotto's Scenes from the Life of Christ and the Virgin in the Arena Chapel at Padua; but the linen there shown is hardly of the true Umbrian type, as the pattern—a strictly conventional lozenge motif alternating with that of the mediaeval confronted birds—is not thrown out in strong contrast but is apparently almost in monochrome. At the time when Giotto was working, however, it must be remembered that indigo was still not available in large quantities, as it had only recently been introduced into Sicily by the Jews during the reign of Frederic II (1212-1250).<sup>1</sup>

While it is not improbable that these blue and white fabrics were produced in other parts of Italy, documentary evidence proves that the industry had its center in Perugia.<sup>2</sup> An inventory of the sacristy of S. Domenico in Perugia, dated 1450, gives a detailed description of the patterns of its altar linen, which appear to be identical with those in towels still preserved to us in museums and private collections. Again, in a Sienese inventory,<sup>3</sup> dated 1482, mention is made of two "guarnappe" for the high altar with dragons and lions woven in cotton "a la Perugia."<sup>4</sup> At the same time, however, there was evidently another center for this industry farther east, in Saxony and Transylvania, where similar weaves were produced, although the examples preserved there in local museums<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Yule. *Travels of Marco Polo*, vol. 2, p. 381, n. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Gnoli. *L'Arte Umbria*, p. 87, refers to a family of weavers from Arras by the name of Bergieres who settled in Perugia in 1463.

<sup>3</sup> Gnoli, *idem*, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> Belluchi. In *L'Arte*, vol. 8, 1905, p. 113.

<sup>5</sup> Roth. *Geschichte des Deutschen Kunstgewerbes in Siebenbürgen*, p. 197ff. and Taf. XXIX.